

## The Goose Girl

By HAROLD MacGRATH

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(Continued from Last Saturday.)

## CHAPTER II.

FOR HER COUNTRY.

**C**OUNT, must I tell you again to broach that subject? There can be no alliance between Ehrenstein and Jugendheit?"

"Why?" asked Count von Herbeck, chancellor.

"One of my reasons is that I do not want any alliance with a country so perfidious as Jugendheit. What! I make overtures—I, who have been so cruelly wronged all these years? You are mad!"

"But what positive evidence have you that Jugendheit wronged you?"

"Positive! Have I eyes and ears? Have I not seen and read and heard?"

"Your highness knows that I look only to the welfare of the country. In those days it was a foregone conclusion that this alliance was to be formed. Now, you persist in averring that the late king was the chief conspirator in abducting her serene highness, added Arnsberg, whose successor I have the honor to be. I have never

yet seen any proofs. Show me something which absolutely convicts them and I'll surrender."

"Your honor?"

The duke struck a bell.

"My secretary and tell him to bring me the packet marked A. He will understand."

The duke was frank in his likes and dislikes. He hated cruelty, and he loved an opponent who engaged him in the open. It was this extraordinary rectitude which made the duke so powerful an aid to Blümmer in the days that followed. The man of iron needed this sort of character as a cover and a buckler to his own duplicities.

Herbeck was an excellent folk. He was as silent and secretive as sand. He moved, as it were, in circles, thus always eluding dangerous corners. He was tall, angular, with a thin, immobile countenance, well guarded by his gray eyes and straight lips. He was a born schemer, with almost limitless ambition, though only he himself knew how far this ambition reached. Twice had he saved Gretchen from the dragnet of vice and with honor.

The secretary came in and laid a thin packet of papers on the chancellor's desk.

The secretary bowed and withdrew. The duke stirred the papers angrily, took one of them and spread it out with a snap.

"Look at that. Whose writing, I ask?"

Herbeck ran over it several times. At length he opened a drawer in his desk, sorted some papers and brought out a yellow letter. This he laid down beside the other.

"Yes, they are alike. This will be Arnsberg. But—mildly—why may say that it is not a cunning forgery?"

"Forgery!" roared the duke. "Read this one from the late king of Jugendheit to Arnsberg then if you still doubt."

Herbeck read slowly and carefully. Then he rose and walked to the nearest window, studying the letter again in the sharper light.

Herbeck returned to his chair. "I wish that you had shown me these long ago. You accused the king?"

"Certainly, but he denied it."

"Yes—Home, read it."

Herbeck compared the two. "Where did you find these?"

"In Arnsberg's desk," returned the duke. "Arnsberg, my favorite playmate, the man I loved and trusted and advanced to the highest office in my power. Is that not the way? Well, dead or alive, 10,000 crowns to him who brings me back to my old ergot."

"You are very diligent," said Herbeck. "And here I am caught. Old not my wife die of a broken heart, and did I not become a broken man? You do not know all. Herbeck not quite all. French also sought the hand of the Princess Sophie. He, too, loved her, but I won. Well, his feelings must have been great to him!"

"But your daughter has been restored to her own."

"True to your infatuated efforts alone. Ah, if such nobles as Herbeck fit in the role between, nothing will ever cross the path of the Princess Sophie."

Herbeck stopped another chapter and took fresh air. "I am being held prisoner," he said, "but I am safe. I have a letter from the Duke of Arnsberg, but I must give up the hand of the Princess Sophie."

"The Duke of Arnsberg?"

"Yes, on a high level, he is a good man."

"Will you consent to this marriage?"

"Would it do any good to reject it?"

"In the contrary, it would do him terrible great harm."

"After all, I am a good man."

"I am a good man."

who will shortly be crowned. My advice is to accept, to let bygones be bygones."

"Write the prince that I respectfully decline."

"Do nothing to hess, your highness, Tempelke. Say that you desire some time to think about the matter. You can change your mind at any time. A reply like this commits you to nothing, whereas your abrupt refusal will only widen the breach."

"The wider the breach the better."

"No, your highness; the past has disturbed you. We can stand war, and it is possible that we might win, even against Jugendheit, but war at this late day would be a colossal blunder. Victory would leave us where we began thirty years ago. And an attack to Jugendheit might precipitate war."

"Have your way, then."

The duke departed, stirred as he had not been since the restoration of the princess. He sought his daughter. She was in the music room. "My child," he began, taking His Highness' hand and drawing her toward a window seat, "the king of Jugendheit asks for your hand."

"Then I am to marry the king of Jugendheit?" There was little joy in her voice.

"Dear, we have not gone so far as that! The King, through his uncle, has simply made a proposal."

"It is for you to decide, father. Whatever your decision is I shall abide by it."

"It is a hard lesson we have to learn, my child. We cannot always marry where we love. Diplomacy and politics make other plans. But fortunately for you, you love no one yet, and the king is young, handsome, they say, and rich. Politically speaking, it would be a great match."

"I am in your hands. You know what is best."

The duke was poignantly disappointed. Why did she not refuse outright, as became one of the house of Ehrenstein?

"What is he like?" she asked.

"That no one seems to know. He has been to his capital but twice in ten years. The young king has been in Paris most of the time. That's the way they educate kings these days. They teach them all the vices. Your father loves you, and if you are inclined toward his majesty, if it is in your heart to become a queen, I shall not let my prejudices stand in the way."

She caught up his hand with a strange passion and kissed it.

"Father, I do not want to marry any one," wistfully. "But a queen?" she added thoughtfully. "Would it be for the good of the state?"

There was reason. "Yes; my objections are merely personal," said the duke.

"For the good of my country I am ready to make any sacrifice."

"Very well, but weigh the matter carefully. There is never any retracing a step of this kind." He paused and then said:

"You are all I have, girl."

"My father?" She stroked his cheek.

The restoration of the Princess Hildegarde of Ehrenstein had been the sensation of Europe, as had been in the earlier days her remarkable abduction. For sixteen years the search had gone on fruitlessly. In a garter in Dresden the agents of Herbeck found her, a singer in the chorus of the opera. The newspapers and illustrated weeklies raged about her for awhile, elaborated the story of her struggles, the mysterious remittances which had from time to time saved her from dire poverty, her ambition, her education which by dint of hard work she had acquired. The duke accused Franz of Jugendheit. Search as they would, the duke and the chancellor never traced the source of the remittances. The duke held stubbornly that the sender of these benefactions was moved by the impulse of a guilty conscience and that this guilty conscience was in Jugendheit.

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